

FROM DISCORD TO DIALOGUE: EXPLORING THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE AND COOPERATION BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND IRAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Geopolitical, spiritual, and economic elements have interacted in a complicated way to shape Pakistan-Iran ties. Even with their shared cultural heritage and historical connections, the two countries' relationship has frequently been marked by tense and distrusting times. In order to shed light on how to promote a more positive discourse and cooperative engagement, this study looks at Pakistan and Iran's chances for cooperation and peace in the twenty-first century. This study, which takes an interdisciplinary approach, explores the historical background of relations between Pakistan and Iran, following the development of diplomatic contacts, commercial exchanges, and strategic alliances. The study looks for prospective areas of convergence as well as underlying causes of disagreement by examining significant occurrences and policy choices. It also looks at how regional dynamics such as the influence of other countries and nearby states affect how the bilateral relationship is shaped. The study also looks into how perceptions and attitudes in Pakistan and Iran are influenced by religion, specifically the Sunni-Shia divide. It evaluates the ways in which political rhetoric and religious narratives impact the dynamics of cooperation and conflict. Furthermore, the study looks at the financial advantages and disadvantages of bilateral commerce, energy cooperation, and building infrastructure, showing areas where these areas might work together for mutual gain. The report also assesses how non-state actors, such as transnational networks and extremist organizations, contribute to regional instability and obstruct efforts at collaboration and peace. It addresses issues with border security and conflicts over land as well as tactics for thwarting extremism and encouraging inclusive discourse. In summary, this study sheds light on the nuances of Pakistan-Iran relationships and makes suggestions for creating a climate that is more favorable to harmony and collaboration in the twenty-first century. It aims to promote understanding and long-term involvement between the two countries by highlighting the value of communication, diplomacy, and measures that foster confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Iran's approach to Pakistan, its neighbor to the east. It makes the case that cooperation among these two governments is unavoidable and will continue despite notable differences and geopolitical obstacles, as well as domestic and international volatility. Pakistan has been seen as a significant and valuable partner by Iran, both during its monarchy till 1979

and after that as an Islamic Republic. Because of the stark contradictions between the national interests as well as goals of the two states, it is doubtful that this cooperation will develop into a deep and strategic alliance. In addition, a number of additional issues impede the growth of relations, including financial constraints, inadequate security, and international

sanctions. This essay discusses the pre-1979 era of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the post-1979 era of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹ Although both Iran and Pakistan are friendly neighbors, their relationship's full potential has not yet been realized. The purpose of this study is to draw attention to the areas where Pakistan and Iran differ and overlap against the backdrop of a shifting global landscape. Many nations, including Pakistan, are now in a state of uncertain security with regard to their initiatives with Iran as a result of the US departure from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This evolution illustrates how important the US component is to Pakistan-Iran relations. Afghanistan's position, India's interaction with Iran, Saudi Arabia-Pakistan relations, and the competition between Riyadh and Tehran are other significant elements. Since both Pakistan and Iran were involved in previous partnerships, their relationship lacks depth and mutual confidence.² Iran and Pakistan are seen as major actors in both regional and global politics. Pakistan and Iran share many religious and cultural traits, but their diplomatic relations have always been tense. This essay examines the substantial political and security obstacles that both nations face in sustaining cordial ties. In addition, public opinion regarding the connection among Pakistan and Iran has also been examined via the lens of public perception. This study aims to examine Pakistanis' perceptions of the connection between Iran and Pakistan by using empirical polling information concerning public opinion regarding Pak-Iran relations from the Gallup and Gilani Pakistan National Survey (1991 & 2015). The majority of Pakistanis, according to the study results, are in support of relations between Iran and Pakistan.³

The Middle East is undergoing a progressive phase of change that is putting each local state's international

strategies to the test. In this new environment, there are opportunities and challenges for different territorial and extra-local governments to advance their national advantages while attempting to reduce those of their opponents. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the many important disputes defining the Middle East's crucial stage. For impact in the Persian Gulf region, Saudi Arabia and Iranian have often continued as true adversaries. Pakistan is trying to mediate between the two states in order to achieve territorial congruity and harmony as a partner of both. Examining the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and Pakistan's attempts at conciliation between the two is the goal of the ensuing work. The purpose of this essay is to examine recent changes in Saudi-Iranian ties and how they affect the Middle East. This study combines analysis and description. Secondary sources including articles, journals, books, publications, and periodicals have been used in conjunction with qualitative research. The report evaluates and investigates Pakistan's function as a go-between for the two states as well as potential effects on Pakistan and the Middle East from Iran and Saudi Arabia's pursuit of regional hegemony.⁴

Think tanks, policy leaders, social scientists, and members of the media in both the regional and global arenas view the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a transformative opportunity. Its strategic location has made it advantageous for the region as a whole as well as for the nations of China and Pakistan. Its goal, like that of other corridors, is to link and promote social and economic collective growth. The corridor clearly contributes to regional connectivity. As such, it could prove beneficial in augmenting the economic collaboration between Iran and Pakistan. Although the two states' relations have remained amicable, the level of trade between them has reached its lowest point as a result of regional and international pressure. The yearly commerce between Pakistan and Iran has not exceeded US\$ 229 million since 2014. The current study concludes, utilizing the SWOT method, that

¹ Czulda, R. (2023). Iran's Approach Towards Pakistan—Between Expectations and Reality. *Asian Affairs*, 54(1), 44-66.

² Raza, F. (2020). Pakistan-Iran relations in the evolving international environment. *Strategic Studies*, 40(2), 79-97.

³ Shah, S. A. A. (2023). Challenges and Opportunities: The Fluctuating Relations Between Pakistan and Iran. *Journal of Advances in Humanities Research*, 2(3), 69-83.

⁴ Zehraa, S., Imtiaz, A., & Ahmad, J. (2020). Pakistan's exertions of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHMS)*, 1(1), 44-52.

Iran's accession to the corridor will mark a watershed in its financial history. Because of international sanctions, Iran is currently experiencing the worst form of economic disaster. It can gradually restore her exports to China, India, and Pakistan via the CPEC route. Iran can also maintain stability in the region in opposition to Saudi Arabia's influence.⁵

Iran, a country rich in civilization dating back thousands of years, is located in the Middle East's most advantageous geopolitical position. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a key player in this region, involving 5894 km of border land and 2440 km of maritime borders with 15 neighboring countries in the Persian and Caspian Seas. The Caspian Sea, with its exceptional location, and the key waterways in the Persian Gulf, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, which serve as an essential gateway to the world's greatest petroleum supply, have all given Iran an amazing potential for local interactions with global implications. Due to recent events in the area, including Saddam Hussein's eight-year-long enforced war, the fall of the Soviet Union's position as Iran's formidable northern neighbor, and the illegal and disastrous US assaults of Afghanistan and Iraq, the enormous economic potential related to Iran has not yet been fully explored.⁶ Over the past fifty years, Iran-Pakistan relations have taken on a unique quality, which is underscored by Islamabad's covert transfer of nuclear materials and technology to Iran. Despite differences in interests and political philosophies about local and global issues, their close relationship has been based on political and strategic imperatives. Both nations have made an effort to strengthen their relations and work out their disagreements. The vitality of the Iran-Pakistan relationship has been greatly influenced by Iran's concerns about the perceived dangers of US containment, the challenges arising from innovations

in Iraq and Afghanistan, its requirement to maintain the balance between power with Saudi Arabia as well as earlier Iraq, and the religious unrest in Pakistan.⁷

Research Questions

1. What lessons can be learned from previous attempts to defuse tensions and how have past conflicts and diplomatic difficulties between Iran and Pakistan affected the prospects for stability and collaboration in the twenty-first century?
2. What are the main geopolitical variables influencing Pakistan-Iran bilateral ties in the modern age, and how do foreign influences and power dynamics in the region affect the two nations' chances of long-term peace and cooperation?
3. What possibilities exist for exploiting areas of common interest to increase bilateral cooperation and foster stability in the Mideast throughout the twenty-first century? How much do Pakistan and Iran's cultural, economic, and safety objectives converge or diverge?

Goal of Research

Reviewing Pakistan-Iran trade relations throughout history was the goal of this study.

Researchers looked into the motivating and disincentive elements of the trading relationships. Furthermore, scholars forecasted the potential for robust relations in the future based on the true facts of trade relationships between Iran and Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Trade agreements, reputable research articles, books, and other written works were studied in order to fulfill the research's objectives.

Commerce between Iran and Pakistan

Iran and Pakistan are two adjacent countries with nearly identical social, religious, cultural, and economic characteristics. Following Pakistan's

⁵ Mangi, S. N., Chachar, A. A., & Shaikh, S. K. (2021). CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR: PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES FOR IRAN. *Grassroots* (17260396), 55(2).

⁶ Soltanieh, A. (2023). "Threats for Peace and Security: Asia vs. West" Developments Oblige the New Iranian Government to Give a Higher Priority to Its Neighbouring Countries. *Threats to Peace and International Security: Asia versus West: Current Challenges in a New Geopolitical Situation*, 168-204.

⁷ Alam, S. (2004). Iran-Pakistan relations: Political and strategic dimensions. *Strategic Analysis*, 28(4), 526-545.

independence, the two countries have close connections and active cooperation in many spheres of life. The topography and positions of Iran and Pakistan facilitate the growth of positive commercial, trade, social, and economic ties. The boundary between these adjacent states is nearly 909 kilometers long. Additionally, there are airways, roads, and railroad tracks connecting the two states. They also supported one another throughout times of peace and conflict. Economic and trade links between Pakistan and Iran are also excellent. The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline was established by both countries to enhance their economic ties, then later, at America's request, India withdrew from the agreement. The gas pipeline connecting Iran and Pakistan is a major undertaking involving the two adjacent states. The successful completion of this project is contingent upon mutual benefit for both states. On the one hand, she can help Pakistan deal with its energy constraint, and on the other, Iran may profit billions of dollars from Pakistan by supplying gas to Pakistan. Finally, Pakistan can serve as a global energy transit route for its surrounding states that have high energy needs. Thus, this initiative represents growth and wealth for Pakistan, Iran, and the surrounding area.⁸ Both the Pakistani public and administration view Iran as a close ally that provides support when needed. There are strong relationships between the populations of the two states. Iranian carpets were highly valued and in high demand in Pakistan in the past. Pakistanis took great pleasure in using carpets and other items created in Iran. Conversely, the Iranian population cherished donning Pakistani attire. In this sense, historical mutual cooperation between the two states has grown. However, compared to earlier times, trade among the two nearby Islamic states is now much less. The degree of bilateral trade used to be quite high.⁹

Trade and business ties have existed for centuries between Iran and the area that is today most known

as Pakistan. Iran as well as the Muslims of India as a whole had friendly relations before to Pakistan's independence. They used the barter system to exchange their items. Following Pakistan's independence, Iran and Pakistan established robust trade relations via a variety of bilateral commercial and industrial agreements as well as flexible regional political and economic organizations, including the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD), which subsequently became known as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). The economic and trade relations between Pakistan and Iran have entered a new phase of development, mutual cooperation, bilateral trade agreements, and other cooperation in various social, educational, and business spheres under the auspices of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). These agreements have healed the divide that existed between Pakistan and Iran.¹⁰ The relationship between Iran and Pakistan is in a good place in the twenty-first century, but there is still room for improvement in a number of areas. Trade, economic, industrial, and social relations are not at their best at the moment, and mutual cooperation and trust-building are greatly needed. While Pakistan has a significant demand for natural resources, Iran remains a country wealthy in natural resources. Any bilateral economic deal between Pakistan and Iran in this context benefits both of the bordering Muslim countries. However, there is little cross-border trade between Pakistan and Iran as a result of international sanctions and pressure placed on Iran owing to its weapons and missile programs, the state of regional peace and order, and mutual mistrust.¹¹

Joint Economic Commission of Pakistan and Iran

A joint panel known as the Pakistan-Iran Joint Economic panel was founded in 1986 to oversee the economic ties between Pakistan and Iran. This commission's primary goal is to define mutually beneficial areas of interest and then create a mutual trade plan that benefits the welfare of the member

⁸ Alam, S. (2004). Iran-Pakistan relations: Political and strategic dimensions. *Strategic Analysis*, 28(4), 526-545.

⁹ Zeb, R. A., & Javaid, U. (2020). Pak-Iran Trade Ties in the 21st Century and Future Prospects for Strong Relationships. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan-Vol. No*, 57(1).

¹⁰ Hussain, M. (1993). Pakistan-Iran Relations in the Changing World Scenario: Challenges and Response. *Foreign policy debate: The years ahead*, 32(5).

¹¹ Kumar, S. (2008). Pakistan-Iran relations: the US factor. *Strategic Analysis*, 32(5), 773-789.

nations as well as the states themselves. The decisions made to further trade and commerce are reviewed by the commission members on a regular basis. Additionally, this commission helps investors and encourages them to make cross-border investments from a variety of sources.

Project Gas Pipeline

The Peace Project, also referred to as the gas pipeline project, is one of the vital initiatives supporting the robust relations between Pakistan and Iran. The largest mutual agreement between Pakistan and Iran is the peace gas pipeline project, which was first initiated in 1994. Upon completion, this initiative will improve the mutual confidence and spheres of collaboration between the Iranian and Pakistani governments. This project is currently in the phase of completion. International sanctions, both political and economic, against Iran have significantly disrupted this endeavor. Similarly, the international aspect of Afghanistan's law and order crisis has impacted the project's timeline for the gas pipeline.¹² The Iranian side has finished the peace gas pipeline. However, from Pakistan's perspective, it is still under construction for a variety of reasons, including a lack of funding and a precarious state of peace and order along the western border. Strong economic linkages between Pakistan and Iran are being negatively impacted by the regional security environment, which is concerning for both countries as they share similar social, economic, and religious standards. One of the main factors impeding Iran and Pakistan's seamless and robust commercial and business ties is the Afghanistan factor. Since commercial proposals are made in a calm setting. To do this, Iran and Pakistan must cooperate in order to drive terrorists out of their respective borders.¹³

The Role of Religion in Pakistan-Iran Relations

In the 1980s, Pakistan and Iran's relations were at their best. Since this was the time of the Islamic revolution of Iran (1979) as well as the Islamization of Pakistan. The Iranian state's decades-old

monarchy came to an end when the Islamic revolutionaries and their followers installed the Islamic ideology government. Similar to this, Pakistan views the years 1977-1988 as the Islamic revolution, which transformed the country from a liberal to a conservative one. Hence, leadership of two states are drawn to each other more than those of other states when their political systems are similar. In the past, despite several stressful situations during times of turmoil and conflict, the Islamic countries and their bordering governments have supported one another. Iran provided Pakistan with military, financial, and economic support throughout the conflict that resulted in the dissolution of Pakistan and the creation of a new state that was independent of Pakistan. There are a number of reasons for this support, all of which contribute to Iran's stability. For example, Iran was concerned that unrest in Eastern Pakistan, which would split the region off from the rest of the country, would spread to the southern region and give rise to calls for the liberation of the Baluchistan which is also part of Iran.

Advantages of cordial ties between Iran and Pakistan

Iran plays a significant role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy. Iran is a crucial component in drawing the boundaries of Pakistan's foreign policy because of its highly strategic location and the fact that the people of Pakistan and Iran share a common history and religion. Pakistan's leaders think that the advancement and prosperity of the country, as well as the region, will benefit from preserving friendly ties with the Iranian states. Furthermore, strengthening ties in the areas of economics, finance, and information technology benefits not only the two states but the entire region.¹⁴ Pakistan, on the other hand, is a state that is in need of natural resources, but Iran is a state that is abundant in natural assets like gas and oil. Additionally, the two states' common border is shared. Transporting natural resources is quite simple in this scenario. Pakistan can save millions of dollars on transportation costs by purchasing fossil fuels from

¹² Pant, H. V. (2009). Pakistan and Iran's dysfunctional relationship. *Middle East Quarterly*.

¹³ Vakil, S. (2006). Iran: Balancing east against west. *Washington Quarterly*, 29(4), 51-65.

¹⁴ Bowen, W. Q., & Kidd, J. (2004). The Iranian nuclear challenge. *International Affairs*, 80(2), 257-276.

Pakistan with ease. However, Pakistan's neighbors, like China and India, also have an urgent need for energy supplies. Pakistan is becoming more of a

regional hub for energy transit as a result of all of these circumstances.



Figure 1: Graph showing Iran theme (1981-2010)

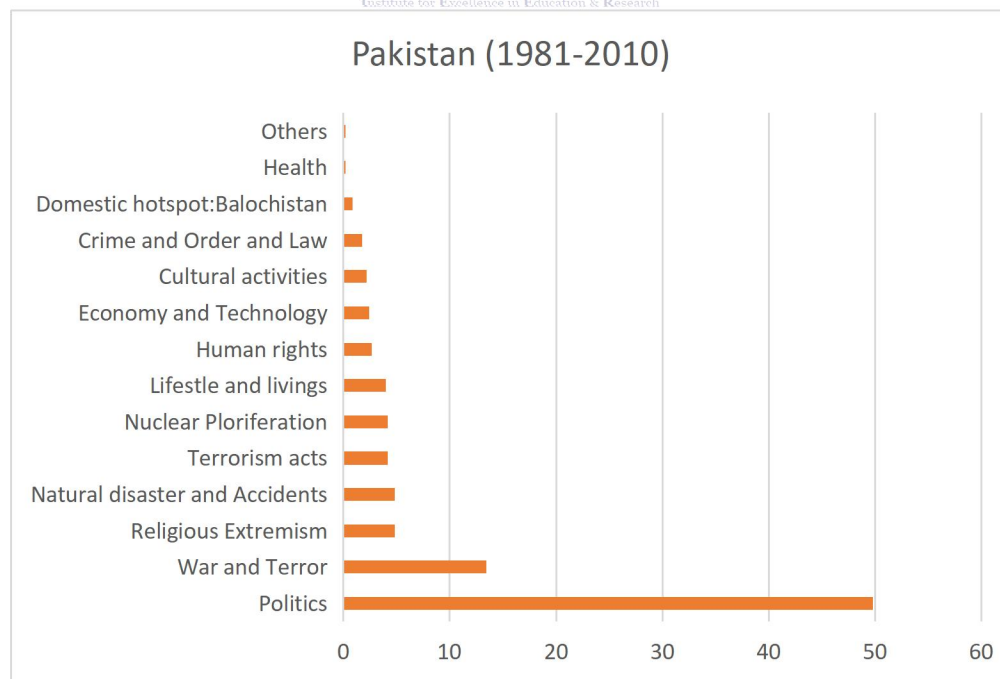


Figure 2: Graph showing Pakistan theme (1981-2010)

China, Iran, and Pakistan are all located in a region that is rich in natural resources, has strategic location, and enormous economic potential. The possibilities for trilateral cooperation are favorable since, in addition to sharing a common geography, their objectives in strategy and economy coincide. China is the primary driver of regional connectivity economic efforts, which are fully aligned with the foreign and economic policies of Pakistan and Iran in the region. These endeavors face numerous obstacles because the security situation within this area has always been precarious. A few obstacles to this nexus are sectarian conflicts, terrorism, religious fanaticism, and involvement by extra-regional entities. The inherent problems of socioeconomic and political unrest may also have a negative impact on this relationship. However, there is little question that this nexus will succeed in the future and permanently alter the economic and geographic makeup of Asia provided the public opinion, government policies, and leadership of these three nations continue to be unwavering in their support for that trilateral collaboration.¹⁵

Pakistan's primary goals in its foreign policy outreach to the Muslim world were to protect its economic interests and Islamic identity. Pakistan promoted the concept of Regional Cooperation for Development, or RCD, in order to accomplish these objectives. Iran and Turkey, two more Muslim nations, were ambivalent about the fundamental concept of a regional organization. Not only were Iran and Turkey reluctant to join this group, but the western nations also harbored misgivings with the RCD concept. The idea that another body would be unnecessary given the presence of the Central Treaty body (CENTO) was met with skepticism by Western powers. Iran and Turkey believed that in order to protect their long-term interests connected to CENTO, they needed to develop RCD without turning away from the Western block. Member nations spread the myth that CENTO would be an organization for economic and developmental cooperation among the co-religion states in order to counteract the West's opposition to RCD in the organization's pre-existing framework. However,

RCD served as a versatile platform for Pakistan, allowing it to choose its foreign policy, shed any traces of Western influence, and maintain its Islamic character. In a similar vein, Pakistan was taken aback by the advances made by Western allies to India following its loss to Chinese during the 1962 border disputes. Pakistan sought out new allies in order to offset this circumstance.¹⁶ This article aims to depict the story of Iran and Pakistan's bilateral relations, both historically and currently, as well as their future trajectory. It examines the geopolitical and geostrategic elements that have changed the character, trajectory, and stance of ties between Iran and Pakistan at various points since 1947. Geographically close, culturally connected, and religiously affiliated, both nations have grown their socioeconomic bonds and occasionally experienced closeness. Additionally, both have chosen to remain silent, maintain their distance from one another, or act as if they were just acquaintances. To put it briefly, the article will also explore the different geopolitical factors that influence Iran and Pakistan, while also providing an in-depth look at numerous bilateral changes, especially from a historical perspective. It will also elaborate on a careful and stimulating blend of analysis concerning the present political shift in the region, especially as it relates to the Afghan issue and the US's new approach to South Asia as well as Afghanistan. In order to usher in a new era of cooperatively robust, friendly, and interest-based relations in the upcoming decades, the paper will evaluate a path ahead for Pakistan and Iran's bilateral relations.¹⁷

Challenges in Pakistan-Iran Relations

Compared to the prior chilly relations throughout the 1990s, ties between Pakistan and Iran have warmed up since 9/11. The Taliban aspect of

¹⁵ Raza, F. (2019). Prospects for Pakistan-China-Iran Trilateral Cooperation. *Strategic Studies*, 39(3), 37-52.

¹⁶ Faheem, F., & Xingang, W. (2021). PAKISTAN AND REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR DEVELOPMENT (RCD): A CRITICAL REVIEW. *PAKISTAN*, 58(1), 1-13.

¹⁷ Tabassum, T. (2017). Snooping into the Saga of Bilateral Ties-Iran and Pakistan in Historical and Future Perspective. *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 3(02), 64-77.

Afghanistan was the cause of this chilly relationship. It is common knowledge that the Taliban oppose the Shia sect, and Iran is exclusively a Shia state. Relations among Iran and Pakistan were strained as a result of Pakistan's support for the Taliban and its acknowledgement of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, the 9/11 catastrophe completely turned the scenario upside down afterward. After US forces invaded Afghanistan, the Taliban regime was overthrown. The relations between Pakistan and Iran began a new chapter in the years that followed. The Iranian nuclear program has historically been one of the main causes of strained relations between Iran and Pakistan. International sanctions are imposed on Iran because of its nuclear program. Given that Pakistan is Iran's neighbor, Pakistan is currently being impacted by the international sanctions imposed on Iran. Iran has not only failed to build strong diplomatic relations with its neighbors, but it has additionally failed to establish strong trade and economic relations with both international and nearby states. As a matter of fact, Pakistan has contributed very little to the upholding of cordial relations between Afghanistan and Iran. Pakistan benefits from strong connections between the United States and Iran.¹⁸

Role of Pakistan and Iran for Peace and Cooperation

Iran and Pakistan are vital to both regional stability and international geopolitics in the twenty-first century. Their collaboration is important for things like energy security, economic growth, and counterterrorism. Bilateral communication and cooperation are needed to address issues like border security and extremism in religion that affect both countries. A stable Middle East and South Asian region are more favorable for regional prosperity when Pakistan and Iran have cordial relations. Increased economic cooperation helps both countries and fosters socioeconomic development. This includes bilateral trade agreements and infrastructure initiatives. Mutual compassion and affection are fostered between Iranian and Pakistani societies through cultural exchanges and

interpersonal contact. Cooperation in combating transnational dangers, such drug trafficking as well as organized crime, enhances security cooperation and promotes stability on a worldwide scale. Pakistan and Iran, two of the most important players in the area, have the power to influence regional dynamics through positive engagement and diplomatic efforts. Their collaboration can act as an example of harmonious cohabitation and teamwork in a world growing more interconnected by the day. The visit by Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi to Pakistan in 2024 is probably intended to talk about regional security issues and strengthen bilateral collaboration, particularly in the energy and economic areas. The visit can be centered on fostering cultural contacts between the two countries, investigating investment prospects, and fortifying trade relations. Furthermore, talks about regional stability are anticipated, especially in light of incidents affecting neighboring Afghanistan & the larger Middle East. The visit by Raisi highlights the value of diplomatic interaction in resolving issues of common concern and achieving shared goals between Pakistan and Iran.

Conclusion

A thorough examination of past trends, current issues, and possible avenues for collaboration yields a number of important conclusions. Both countries have shared objectives and areas of mutual assistance, such as economic and security cooperation, despite historical difficulties and divergent interests. Opportunities for communication and reconciliation are provided by diplomatic endeavors and measures aimed at fostering confidence. Pakistan-Iran relations are significantly shaped by external players, which emphasizes the importance of regional collaboration and multilateral participation. People-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges can promote mutual respect and understanding between both societies. In the end, achieving the common goals of stability and economic growth in the twenty-first century requires cultivating a culture of communication, cooperation, and respect for one another.

¹⁸ Ali, M. (2001). *Readings in Pakistan Foreign Policy 1971-1998*. oxford university press.

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